

**The following history was provided by an eastern Oregonian who marched locally
from 1963 thru 1971.**

We thank him for his generous donation of Pacific Northwest Drum Corps history.

NORTHWEST DRUM CORPS UNOFFICIAL TRADITIONS: COUNTING HORNLINES AND LOUD BRASS LINES

It was never officially talked about or promoted by anyone, but there was an informal non-judged competition between corps to see who had the largest hornline and who could play the loudest.

It would be a common experience to talk with someone who attended a competition and find that they not only knew what the scores and placements were, but also could tell you how many horns each corps had and who was the loudest (was guilty of this). Some of the criteria involved: If the hornline was small (18 to 24 horns), did they project a sound of 30 or more horns? If the hornline was large (30 plus horns), did they project a strong volume or did they project a smaller hornline volume? (Note: This is in the 1960s era, don't compare it with today's standards. All hornlines were smaller then, but could emit a much more powerful volume than what a similar sized present era corps could.)

As an example, both the Shamrocks and Thunderbirds (when they used more than 30 horns) projected appropriate volumes associated with the hornline size they were using. During some years (not all years), there were some corps with small hornlines (18 to 24 horns) that could emit volumes that would sound as if they were using 30 horns (Hawks, Columbians, and Thunderbirds). However, it could work the other way also. In 1971, the Rangers increased to a 32-member hornline midsummer from 10 horns. The last competition of the season was 4 weeks after 3/4 of the hornline was added (everyone was new to drum corps and this was their first competition). The Rangers were louder and fuller than what the previous 10-member hornline could emit, but did not have the full volume a 32-member hornline could have projected (don't think anybody anywhere would have done any better under the same circumstances).

Hornline size gave a hint of how a corps was doing (if it was on the rise or on a decline). It was also a method of "showing off" to the other corps as to how well they were doing. Sometimes a corps would increase the number of Contras or Mellophones just to play with other corps' minds (mellophones, french horns, and contras could project a louder sound individually than the sopranos or bass baritones), but would end up usually creating balancing issues for the

hornline. As an example, hornlines having 30 to 50 members would usually have no more than 3 french horns, 3 mellophones, and 3 contras, and could still maintain a balanced sound output. One year, the Portland Hawks used 3 contras for a hornline that numbered less than 24 horns. The balance issue created from that mostly sounded like they were heavily bottom heavy. At other times, the Hawks and other corps would compensate for the out of balance condition and have those instruments (mellophone, french horn, contra) tone down to improve overall balance output. Or, like what one 50 plus hornline from the Midwest did with a 5-member contra line: used less bass baritones and had a couple of the contras play 3rd baritone parts, while the other contras played regular contra parts.

Spoke with an ex-Madison Scout a few years ago (he was a manager at the local Target), who also was one of the instructors of the Madison Scout Alumni Corps. He mentioned their use of 15-to-20-member contra lines (for a hornline in excess of 80 members), and the goal was not for the listening audience to actually hear them directly but to "feel" their presence. That indirectly explained why the Madison DCI corps used an electronic bass guitar player to cover the contra parts that wouldn't have been heard otherwise. That kind of illustrated the difference between using marching tubas (which they were doing) and contra bass bugles (which would have created a bottom-heavy sound).

The valve/rotary G bugle always received a bad rap for being out of tune. That wasn't the case in reality. The horn, if properly adjusted, could play in tune. When the horn was played with full power, however, it could start to go out of tune. Note: a trumpet or trombone played too loud would also have tone issues. The one advantage the bugle had over trumpets/trombones, however, is that they were designed for outdoor use, and when played loud would not emit a "blat" sound that you would get from the indoor designed instrument (trumpet/trombone).

There was no formal directive for drum corps bugle lines to play louder than one thought they could (from a non-drum corps person perspective). But because it was meant to be an outdoor activity and the corps were smaller than your typical high school marching band, the larger sound output compensated for the small size (talking about corps with 70 or fewer members and having hornlines no more than 32 to 35 horns). There was, however, an informal competition between corps to see who could be the loudest. It brought a sense of pride to the corps' members when their corps bugle lines were powerful. If there wasn't enough power output, the corps could suffer the consequences of being labeled a "band," which was the worse of the worse insults that could be assessed to a drum corps.

Having a loud hornline improves the overall morale of the corps. Spoke one time, several decades ago, to an active marching member (was on the brass line) of a corps that always placed high in national competitions. Their bugle instructor had a music degree and was a former high school band teacher. He also had marched with a top-ranking drum corps during his teen years. The bugle instructor became concerned with the problems the hornline experienced when playing super loud (not all, but some hornline members played out of tune

during very loud sections), and how it affected the brass score and overall placement of the corps in competitions. So, he had the hornline tone down the highest volume levels to a "loud but not too loud," and not the "blow the stands down" volume the corps was known for (he must have foreseen the future). The hornline accommodated the new style, but the overall morale of the corps suffered. The corps functioned as it normally did, but started to lose ground to corps they normally had no concern with. Then, there was a competition the bugle instructor wasn't able to attend. The bugle line was aware of this, and "blew the stands down" when they played loud. Not only did it make the overall morale improve in the corps, the corps outscored all the corps that they previously lost ground to (the bugle score might have suffered a little, but everything else improved). The corps director picked up on this and had the bugle instructor stop promoting the "loud but not too loud" methodology. Corps' scoring kept improving from that time on, and the corps eventually went on to almost win nationals later that summer.